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ABSTRACT

The platoon school plan, originally developed in Gary, Indiana, appealed to Progressives in the 1920's for both its administrative efficiency and achievement of a creative humanistic, and democratic education. Students were divided into two sections, and while one section filled all the classrooms and studied academic subjects during the morning hours, the second utilized the rest of the school facility in more specialized activities such as art, music, dancing, dramatics, scientific experiments, athletics, workshops, and library work. In the afternoon the two groups switched. In the 1920's Alice Barrows, in her position at the U. S. Office of Education, moved to the forefront as the most aggressive national publicist for the platoon school plan. Barrows supported the plan not because of its efficiency, but because it humanized instruction, permitted the child to be treated naturally as a human being, and developed the child's individuality. In the late 20's and 30's Barrows' ideological position on the platoon system shifted from moderate reform to the extreme left, as she focused on the plan as a means for egalitarian social change. (Author/DE)

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ALICE BARROWS AND THE PLATOON SCHOOL, 1920-1940

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The platoon school plan, originated in Gary, Indiana by Superintendent of Schools William A. Wirt, has been recognized as one of the important innovations in progressive education. But progressivism in education meant different things to different people. For some, progressive education represented the ideal implementation of democratic values in the schools; but for others it meant the full achievement of administrative and bureaucratic efficiency -- David Tyack's "one best system." Progressive education either freed school children to follow their instincts, or chained them to a predetermined course of learning and behavior. Not surprisingly, these same contradictions can be detected in the history of the platoon school in America.[1]

Divided motivations typified advocates of the platoon school. The administrative progressives saw in the plan the perfection of the principles of scientific efficiency. Wirt had developed a system in Gary which boasted full utilization of the school plant. Students were divided into two platoons, X and Y. While platoon X filled all the classrooms studying academic subjects during the morning hours, platoon Y was subdivided into smaller groups for a succession of specialized activities. These students utilized the athletic fields, gymnasiums, swimming pools, workshops, libraries, and science laboratories; they took instruction in art, music, dancing, or dramatics; some went on field trips into the community; by turns, they

attended auditorium periods for group singing, movies, student theatricals, or other special programs. After lunch, the two platoons switched, platoon Y attending classrooms and platoon X going to the specialized activities. Wirt also raised a high standard of bureaucratic efficiency. Flexible scheduling and rotation of students from class to class and from activity to activity made it possible to use every room, facility, and piece of equipment constantly throughout the school day. And the addition of the specialized facilities made it virtually possible to squeeze twice as many students into a single school building.[2]

The financial advantages of such a school plan made it especially attractive to school administrators and school boards. In New York City, for example, during the mayoralty of John Purroy Mitchel, 1914-1917, a massive effort was made to introduce the Gary platoon plan in the city's elementary schools. The innovation failed, however, when the schools became embroiled in city politics, and efficiency-minded reformers in the Mitchel administration were unable to convince the voters that the Gary plan was anything more than a device to save money at the expense of their childrens' education.[3] But despite this setback, the platoon plan prospered during the 1920s. By the end of the decade, more than 200 cities had adopted the platoon system for some or all of their schools. Detroit had 110 schools on the plan, and Pittsburgh had 75. Other major cities which had implemented the plan included Philadelphia, Cleveland, Los Angeles, Hartford, Memphis, Portland, Kansas City, Dallas, Seattle, Cincinnati, Toledo, Akron,

Newark, Salt Lake City, Tulsa, and Birmingham.[4] According to Raymond E. Callahan's Education and the Cult of Efficiency, the financial savings promised by the plan served as the key argument for the platoon school plan in most of the cities where it was adopted.[5]

But the Gary plan or platoon school appealed to some progressives for entirely different reasons. By contrast to the administrative progressives, the social progressives saw in the platoon school the ideal opportunity for the achievement of a creative, humanistic, and democratic education. In addition to building efficiency into his Gary plan, William Wirt sought to create "a self-sustaining child community" in each school. Following John Dewey, Wirt developed programs by which children learned by doing. Thus, in the Gary schools, the carpentry shop turned out desks, tables, chairs, and bookcases for the classrooms; the print shop handled all the school's printing needs (including publication of Superintendent Wirt's numerous speeches and addresses on the Gary Plan); painting, electrical, and plumbing needs of the schools were supplied by student workers under the guidance of teacher-artisans. Botany students worked on the school grounds,

trimming lawns and caring for trees, shrubs, and gardens. Students in commercial courses such as typing, stenography, and bookkeeping worked in the school business office and ran a store and bank for other children. Girls in cooking classes helped prepare school lunches. Pupils in sewing classes made their own clothing. And, platoon schools, with their specialized instruction in art, music, dramatics, dancing, and other activities provided a fuller and enriched curriculum, an education which prepared broadly rather than narrowly for life. As John Dewey wrote in his book, Schools of Tomorrow, the Gary Schools sought to train children to make "the most intelligent use of their own capabilities and of their environment."[6]

While the savings and efficiency promised by the platoon plan served to hasten its adoption during the 1920s, it is my contention that the social progressives promoted the platoon school much harder and more successfully than Callahan or any other scholar has suggested. By way of elaboration of this theme, I would like to consider the career of one such social progressive who served for almost 25 years in the U.S. Office of Education -- a woman named Alice Barrows. As William Wirt turned inward after the 1917

defeat of the Gary plan in New York City and the publication of the critical General Education Board report in 1918, and as he moved to the right politically and economically, Alice Barrows moved to the forefront as the most aggressive national publicist for the platoon school during the 1920s and early 1930s.

A graduate of Vassar College in 1900, Barrows taught English at the Packer Collegiate Institute in Brooklyn for two years and at the Ethical Culture School in Manhattan for another year. In 1904 she returned to Vassar as an instructor in English, but left in 1907 for graduate work at Columbia University's Teachers' College, where she took courses with John Dewey. From 1908 to 1911, Barrows worked as a social investigator with the Russell Sage Foundation, making extensive studies of women workers in the New York City garment trades. In 1911, she returned to educational work, becoming director of the Vocational Guidance Survey sponsored by the Public Education Association of New York City, a private group promoting progressive educational reforms. In 1914, when William Wirt became an educational consultant to New York mayor John Purroy Mitchel, Barrows was hired as Wirt's

secretary for the New York work. Over the next four years, she orchestrated a massive propaganda campaign to build support for the Gary plan. She wrote pamphlets and articles, gave innumerable speeches, organized parents' groups, mobilized civic leaders and reformers, fought obstructionist school officials, and lobbied with politicians. After the voters rejected school reform in the mayoralty election of 1917, Barrows took a position in the City Schools Division of the U.S. Bureau of Education and promptly launched a nationwide platoon school campaign, this time backed by the resources of the Federal government.[7]

Unlike the administrative progressives, who emphasized the scientific efficiency of the platoon school, Alice Barrows saw more creative possibilities in the plan. As educator Arthur B. Moehlman wrote in The Nation's Schools in 1942, "Alice Barrows caught the educational significance and philosophy behind the administrative facade of the balanced work-study-play elementary plan and read, we are afraid, much deeper philosophy into the scheme than Mr. Wirt really meant." Barrows was consumed with anger at what she considered "the straight-jacket methods of the traditional school." "Something," she

later wrote in her unpublished autobiography, "had to be done about hurrying up the application of Dewey's educational theories to the masses of children in the public schools. . . . I was going to do what I could to change the public school system. Nothing less."[8]

To Barrows, Wirt's Gary plan represented Dewey's educational theory put into practice. The platoon school, she contended, made "the school exist for the child, not the child for the school system. It humanizes instruction and permits the child, for the first time, to be treated naturally and as a human being. It develops the child's individuality. It educates all his faculties." Thus, the platoon plan meant "the biggest thing in democratic educational reconstruction in the country;" it was an "achievement in democracy," a real effort at "free" schooling in an era when urban schools had become rigidly bureaucratized. After a visit to platoon schools in Cleveland, Barrows reported enthusiastically: "I liked the spirit of the children and teachers in all the schools. It was free and natural, and yet there was no disorder or lack of discipline. I felt that these children were learning how to think, that their school was a community in which they were engaged in worth-while activities that had meaning to them. The teachers

seemed alert and interested in their work, interested in experimenting and trying new things." Barrows, in short, rejected the central position of the administrative progressives, and promoted the platoon plan prior to the mid-twenties as a child-centered school reform.[9]

Alice Barrows' job in the U.S. Bureau of Education from 1918 to 1942 gave her the opportunity to promote this kind of school reform on a national scale. Her job -- first as a specialist in "social and industrial relations in education" and later as an expert in school building problems -- was one of making surveys of public school systems and recommending desirable curricular and building changes. Over the course of the next decade, she made extensive surveys of the schools in Memphis, Tennessee; Lexington, Kentucky; Passaic, New Jersey; Mount Vernon, New York; Portland, Oregon; Wilmington, Delaware; Wheeling, West Virginia; Alexandria, Virginia; and numerous other cities. In each case, her published report convincingly laid out the educational advantages of the platoon system over traditional curricular and building arrangements. She also promoted the platoon plan in articles for School Life (the Bureau of Education's official monthly

journal), in innumerable speeches to teachers and parents, and in her correspondence with school officials around the nation.[10]

Barrows continued her platoon school efforts on another level, as well. In the early twenties, she organized national conferences on the platoon school plan under the auspices of the Bureau of Education. These meetings led to the formation in 1925 of a new and independent professional organization with the unwieldy name of the National Association for the Study of the Platoon or Work-Study-Play School organization. For more than half a decade, while holding down her full-time government job, Barrows served as its executive secretary and as founder, editor, and frequent contributor for its quarterly journal, The Platoon School -- virtually a second full-time job.[11]

Although, as Callahan notes, many continued to advocate the platoon plan for its financial advantages during the twenties, Alice Barrows articulated a contrary position. Allied at first with the libertarian wing of educational progressivism, her thinking about the purposes of education shifted in the late 1920s to the social reconstructionist position -- a shift from the child-centered school to the society-centered school. During the twenties, Barrows gradually abandoned the idea of the school as promoting individual self-expression and began talking of the need for the "socialized school." Democratic education which met

individual needs and permitted individual achievement gave way to education which prepared children to live; children taught in platoon schools, she contended, "will know how to live." Because the platoon school prepared children for the social and economic realities of an industrialized society, Barrows considered the plan a means of social reconstruction.[12]

This shift in Barrows' thought became even more pronounced during the thirties. Caught up in the heady optimism of the early Roosevelt years, she became convinced that the good society could be achieved through planning. Captivated by the progressive spirit of New Deal Washington, she became involved in many political and ideological causes besides education -- civil liberties for radicals, civil rights for Blacks, and support for Loyalist Spain, among others. During the forties, and after her retirement from the Office of Education, she assumed leadership positions in several alleged communist-front organizations such as the Congress of American-Soviet Friendship, the National Federation of Constitutional Liberties, and the Progressive Citizens of America. Hauled before the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee in 1953 during the McCarthy hysteria, she invoked the fifth amendment when asked if she was a communist and lectured the senators on

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the meaning of liberty, world peace, and human freedom and dignity. As Edmund Wilson noted of her in 1934, she had become convinced that "a new deal in education is impossible without a new social-economic system." By the mid-thirties, that is, Barrows had gone beyond thinking of the platoon school system as an agent of social change; rather, she promoted radical social and economic change by other means.[13]

Throughout her ideological pilgrimage from moderate reform to the extreme left, Alice Barrows focused on the platoon school system first as an agent of democracy, and then as an instrument of social change. She recognized that the plan's efficiency and savings made it attractive to school men. But, in all of her writing and speaking, she emphasized the educational advantages of the plan. From her position in the U.S. Office of Education, Barrows became the most forceful and aggressive promoter of the platoon plan during the twenties. Field service reports to the City Schools Division of the Office of Education show that Barrows travelled more often and for longer periods of time than any other staff member. She made more surveys, published more reports, and gave more speeches, as well. During the Portland, Oregon survey, for instance, she gave 54 platoon school

speeches in 50 days. During several summers, she taught platoon school courses to teachers at the University of Oregon. At the same time, she ran the affairs of the national platoon school association, edited The Platoon School magazine, and organized national and regional meetings and conferences on the plan. The active and vigorous promotion work of Alice Barrows, I am suggesting, brought the platoon school into national prominence during the twenties. More than any other individual, she led the platoon school movement. And for her, the platoon school was not the "factory system" in education. For those most heavily committed to the platoon school plan, the administrative features were clearly less important than the educational advantages. To the extent that the arguments of Alice Barrows and her colleagues were successful, the platoon school prospered.

1. A full elaboration of these ideas on the contradictions and ambiguities in progressive education can be found in Ronald D. Cohen and Raymond A. Mohl, "The Paradox of Progressive Education: William A. Wirt, Alice P. Barrows, and the Gary Schools," unpublished paper. See also Christopher Lasch, The World of Nations: Reflections on American History, Politics, and Culture (New York, 1973), 257-261.

2. Raymond E. Callahan, Education and the Cult of Efficiency: A Study of the Social Forces that Have Shaped the Administration of the Public Schools (Chicago, 1962), 126-147. See also Randolph S. Bourne, The Gary Schools (Boston, 1916; reprinted, Cambridge, Mass., 1970), and William Paxton Burris, "The Public School System of Gary, Inc.," United States Bureau of Education, Bulletin, No. 18 (1914).

3. Raymond A. Mohl, "Schools, Politics, and Riots: The Gary Plan in New York City, 1914-1917," Paedagogica Historica, 15 (June 1975), 46-79.

4. Roscoe D. Case, The Platoon School in America (Stanford, Calif., 1931), 25-27; William S. Deffenbaugh, "Significant Movements in City School Systems," United States Bureau of Education, Bulletin, No. 16 (1929). See also Charles L. Spain, The Platoon School (New York, 1924).

5. Callahan, Education and the Cult of Efficiency, 130-136, 141-147.

6. Bourne, Gary Schools, 35-56, 113-130. See also Rheta Childe Dorr, "Keeping the Children in School," Hampton's Magazine, XXVII (July 1911), 55-66; Albert Jay Nock, "An Adventure in Education," The American Magazine, LXXVII (April 1914), 25-28; John Dewey and Evelyn Dewey, Schools of Tomorrow (New York, 1915; reprinted, 1962), 181.

7. For Barrows career to 1918, see her unpublished Autobiography, typescript, Alice P. Barrows Papers, University of Maine Library, Orono, Maine; and Raymond A. Mohl, "Urban Education in the Twentieth Century: Alice Barrows and the Platoon School Plan," Urban Education, IX (October 1974), 213-237.

8. Arthur B. Moehlman, "Alice Prentice Barrows," The Nation's Schools, 30 (September 1942), 13; Barrows, Autobiography, 79, 81, 131.

9. Alice P. Barrows, "Statement in Reply to Judge Hylan's Attack on the Gary Schools," 1917, typescript, William A. Wirt Papers, Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana; Alice P. Barrows to George Foster Peabody, April 20, 1918, ibid.; Alice P. Barrows, "The Wirt Plan of Education," Vassar Quarterly, 1 (1916), 81; Alice P. Barrows, "A Brief Statement in Regard to the Platoon Schools of Cleveland, Ohio,"

in Reference File on the Platoon Plan, Box 2, Records of the U.S. Office of Education, Record Group 12, National Archives.

10. Barrows activities during these years can be followed in her extensive correspondence with William Wirt in the Wirt Papers; in her Field Service Reports, 1923-1929, Commissioner's Office, Box 25, U.S. Office of Education, Record Group 12, National Archives; in her survey reports, each usually published as a U.S. Bureau of Education Bulletin; and in her published articles: Alice P. Barrows, "The Work-Study-Play, or Balanced-Load Plan," The New Republic, 40 (November 12, 1924), 16-17; Alice P. Barrows, "Public Works for Public Schools," School Life, 19 (January 1934), 96-98; Alice P. Barrows, "Planning School Buildings," ibid., 22 (May 1937), 268-270; Alice P. Barrows, "The School Auditorium As a Theater," ibid., 25 (January 1940), 107, 123.

11. Alice P. Barrows, "First National Conference on the Work-Study-Play or Platoon Plan," U.S. Bureau of Education, Bulletin, No. 35 (Washington, D.C., 1922); Barrows to Charles L. Spain, March 10, May 6, 19, September 18, 1925, Wirt Papers; Barrows to Wirt, March 25, May 14, 1925, ibid.

12. On this shift in Barrows' thinking, see Alice P. Barrows, "The Problem

of Adult Education in Passaic, New Jersey," U.S. Bureau of Education, Bulletin, No. 4 (1920); Alice P. Barrows, "Modern Cities and Children," The Platoon School, III (June-August 1929), 79-81; Alice P. Barrows, "City Civilization and Children, of the Significance of the Work-Study Play or Platoon School Plan," unpublished speech typescript, c. 1930, Barrows Papers; Barrows, Autobiography, 123-125.

13. Maxine Wood, Personal interview, East Blue Hill, Maine, August 29, 1974; Elsa Ueland to author, October 20, 1973; Alice P. Barrows, "Who is Un-American?" unpublished speech typescript, 1938, Maxine Wood Papers (copy in author's possession); Interlocking Subversion in Government Departments, Hearings Before the Subcommittee to Investigate the Administration of the Internal Security Act and Other Interal Security Laws, U.S. Senate, Judiciary Committee, 83rd Congress, 1st Session, Part 12 (Washington, D.C., 1953), 823-840; Edmund Wilson, "Miss Barrows and Doctor Wirt: An Inside Story of a Famous Episode," Scribner's Magazine, XCVI (August 1934), 104.